



State of Wisconsin
Department of Public Instruction
Elizabeth Burmaster, State Superintendent

NEW WISCONSIN PROMISE CONFERENCE

State Superintendent Elizabeth Burmaster

New Wisconsin Promise: Closing the Achievement Gap Conference
Opening Remarks

Monona Terrace Community and Convention Center, Madison — January 15, 2008

Thank you Rick Grobschmidt for your kind introduction. Rick is a former teacher and also served for 17 years in our state Legislature before joining the Department of Public Instruction. I thank him for his leadership at DPI.

I'd also like to thank the students from the Seventh Grade Choir from Alexander Middle School in Nekoosa, and their director, Mr. Jerry Osowski. As a music teacher, I know the challenges of performing a cappella numbers with three-part harmony, and they did a marvelous job.

It was also a great day yesterday, with more than 250 people attending the pre-conference sessions on differentiation with Norman Kunc and Emma Van der Klift.

I'd also like to thank the presenters who make this conference possible by volunteering their time and expertise. They are offering more than 93 hours of presentations and workshops here at this conference.

And I'd like to thank all the educators and administrators in attendance for showing their commitment to improving education for all of their students.

I am honored to serve as your state superintendent and to have the privilege of representing you and telling the story of the great work being done in public education in Wisconsin.

There is no place I would rather be than a room surrounded by educators and individuals dedicated to putting our children and their education first. Never underestimate the tremendous influence you have in the lives of your students.

Wisconsin has a long and proud tradition of supporting quality education. We have made a strong commitment to our New Wisconsin Promise: to raise the level of achievement for ALL students and to close the achievement gap between students of color, economically disadvantaged students, and their peers.

Our success in the past has been because we worked together in local communities. And our success in the future will only be realized if we continue to come together as an entire community to support families and children.

No matter where your school is located in Wisconsin, the challenges facing educators grow everyday. One of the major challenges is the increasing level of poverty among our students. We are seeing this in our largest city, Milwaukee, where the percent of students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch is at 80 percent, and in our more rural areas, such as Glidden, where more than 62 percent of the students are in poverty.

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Overall, the state level of students eligible for free or reduced lunch is now more than 31 percent, which is 10 percentage points higher than in 2001. Smaller class sizes, promoting 4-year-old kindergarten, and increasing the number of students who have access to school breakfasts are just a few of the strategies we have to use. Our New Wisconsin Promise is our blueprint for ensuring every student can learn and is prepared for post secondary education and to enter the workforce. It is a difficult task that takes the entire community working together. But few other professions are as rewarding as being an educator.

I am now the proud grandmother of our 1½ year old grandson, Benjamin. His mother, the oldest of our three children, is in her first year of teaching eighth grade in Stockton, California. Our second daughter at age 26, after working on Capitol Hill in D.C., now plans to apply for teaching certification.

Education is a family affair for us. My grandmothers were teachers, my mother was a teacher, my husband is an educator, and now my children are educators, or are heading in that direction. It is an extremely hard job, but in our hearts, and I am sure in yours, you have come to know as well, that a teacher never stops learning and a learner never stops teaching.

That is why we all want to work in the schools. We know that working with children and young people is one of the most exciting, challenging, and important things we can do. As John Dewey said, we know that “education is not preparation for life, education is life itself.”

We want our students to have the knowledge and skills to be productive citizens in our 21st century global society, and we realize that an educational system isn’t worth a great deal if it only teaches young people how to make a living, but doesn’t teach them how to live. We want our children to experience learning worth remembering for a lifetime.

In challenging and complex times, which we certainly are in, we all need caring, committed people in our lives who guide our thinking and help us feel connected to our faith and hope in the future. Working in education, we must look to each other for that support.

And, that is why I want to recognize and thank all of you here today. You are not thanked enough for the tremendous contribution you make to your communities and to the quality of life in our state.

You are working hard to ensure the success of all of your students. As we all remain persistent in our on-going, sustained efforts to improve student achievement, remember that a test score is a snapshot in time that can guide our instruction, but never let a test score label the future.

Breadth and depth of the curriculum, critical thinking, and creative problem solving skills will truly prepare this generation for success in our 21st century interconnected world.

James Baldwin said, “They are all our children, and we will benefit from or pay for what they become.” Your efforts show that you agree. You are all working to close the gap in achievement between economically disadvantaged students, students of color, and their peers. Your focus is on student achievement, on embracing the transformation needed to connect what is learned in the classroom to the real world.

In 2008, just like it was more than 150 years ago, public education is the foundation of our democracy. People in your communities believe in your schools, and they entrust their children’s future to your care. We have strong schools because we have outstanding teachers, committed administrators, engaged community leaders, and active parents. Strong partnerships and relationships will lead you through the challenges.

As we move forward, we must renew our commitment to those ideals that first drew us to serve in public education. Our work in education is true public service. It is hard and demanding work. Teaching and learning occurs a school year, a day, an hour, a minute, a heartbeat at a time. It is our on-going sustained efforts over time as educators that make a difference—efforts that can’t always be judged by a test score.

Your students may forget what you taught them about the subject, but they will never forget what you as their teacher understood about them.

When educators reflect on their careers, I think we are proudest of the moments when we taught with love. And I am proud of your work, and the dedication you show to your students and communities.

I hope you enjoy this conference and are able to take away from it lessons that will help you back in your communities. Not only will you be able to hear from some wonderful speakers such as Sonia Nieto, Cheryl Brown Henderson, and Kim Oliver, but you will also have opportunities to learn from each other. I look forward to working with you throughout the school year and beyond, and I wish everyone the best for 2008.

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Elizabeth Burmaster is the elected state superintendent of public instruction.

NOTE: A high-resolution photo of the state superintendent is available for download on the Department of Public Instruction “Media Contacts and Resources” webpage at <http://dpi.wi.gov/eis/vm-media.html>.